

# Minds and Morals<sup>1</sup>

Sarah Sawyer

University of Sussex

August 2013

**Final draft. Please refer to the official version:**

Sarah Sawyer (2014) 'Minds and Morals', *Philosophical Issues, Extended Knowledge*, 24: 393-408.

## 0. Introduction

This paper concerns three different debates: the first is a debate over the nature of representation in thought; the second is a debate over the connection between a subject's moral judgements and her motivation to act; and the third is a debate over the connection between a subject's reasons for action and her subjective motivational set. Each of these debates is categorised as a debate between internalism (about a particular subject-matter) and externalism (about that subject-matter), and, perhaps unsurprisingly, they share a common structure. Each of the various internalisms prioritises the perspective of the individual in some way, whereas each of the various externalisms emphasises the importance of facts that may well lie outside the individual's perspective. The debates have largely received independent treatment<sup>2</sup>, perhaps on the grounds that the connection between the debates runs no deeper than the structural similarity stated; but the connection between the debates is more than merely structural.

I take the first debate—the debate over the nature of representation in thought—to be primary.<sup>3</sup> This is, first, because the other two debates presuppose that there are representational states: moral judgements that may or may not be internally connected to motivation; and sets of beliefs and desires that may or may not provide reasons for action. But the *very possibility* of representation in thought depends on an externalist understanding of representational states. And this takes us to the second, and more fundamental, reason for

---

<sup>1</sup> Versions of this paper were presented at the University of Sussex Philosophy Society and at the SIFA Graduate Conference held at the University of Cagliari. Thanks to audiences on both occasions. Particular thanks go to Michael Morris for characteristically helpful comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions are to be found in Majors and Sawyer (2007), and Greenberg (2009).

<sup>3</sup> There is a sense in which perceptual representation is more fundamental still. However, I leave perceptual representation to one side in this paper and focus instead on conceptual representation because the connection with the other debates only emerges at the conceptual level. Arguments in favour of the world-dependence of perceptual content parallel a strand of argument in favour of the world-dependence of conceptual content. See Burge (1986b), (1986c) and (1988). See also Davies (1991) and (1992).

the primacy of the debate over the nature of representation. Once it is understood that representational content is essentially individuated with reference to relations between the subject and her environment, a resolution to the other debates comes into view. An externalist understanding of representation in thought has the resources to overcome the apparent disagreements evident in the debates concerning moral judgement and reasons for action.

The general aim of the paper is to elucidate the more-than-merely-structural connection between the debates, and in particular to show that representational externalism binds the debates inextricably together. The more specific aim of the paper is to elaborate a new moral theory, which I call ‘moral externalism’, that emerges from consideration of externalism about representational content. In section 1, I characterize an externalist theory of representational content. I won’t offer direct arguments for the view, since, aside from having argued for it elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, the main purpose of the paper is to show how externalism about representational content impacts on the two debates in moral philosophy. The paper as a whole, however, constitutes an indirect argument for externalism about representational content on the grounds that it can explain away the apparent disagreement in the two debates in moral philosophy. In section 2, I set up the debate concerning the connection between moral judgement and motivation, and show how an externalist theory of representation can resolve it. In section 3, I show how the resulting view of the connection between moral judgement and motivation can itself resolve the debate concerning the connection between a subject’s reasons for action and her subjective motivational set. I conclude in section 4.

## **1. Representational Content in Thought**

This section provides an initial characterization of externalism about representational content in thought.<sup>5</sup> I start with a simple example. One thing I believe is that penguins can’t fly. My capacity to believe this clearly depends on my having the concept *penguin*—if I didn’t have the concept *penguin*, then I couldn’t have any thoughts involving the concept *penguin*, which is to say, I couldn’t have any thoughts about penguins *as* penguins. But what does my possession of the concept *penguin* depend on? According to externalism about representational content, relations between a thinker and her external environment play an essential role in determining her concepts. The fact that I have the concept *penguin*, for example, depends in part, but essentially, on the fact that I have been related in the right kind

---

<sup>4</sup> See Sawyer (2007) and (2011).

<sup>5</sup> For the classic arguments for externalism about representational content, see Burge (1979), (1982) and (1986a). See Putnam (1973) for a precursor to these arguments.

of way to penguins themselves; I have read about them, visited them in zoos, watched programs about them, heard stories about them, and so on. And if there had been no penguins around anywhere, then, plausibly, I couldn't have possessed the concept *penguin*. After all, how could I have acquired it?

This simple line of thought does not apply to every possible concept—it is no doubt possible to possess a concept in the absence of entities to which that concept applies.<sup>6</sup> This is consistent with an externalist understanding of the nature of representation. The externalist claim is simply that there could be no representation in thought without *some* relations to an environment. This line of thought is sometimes backed by the example of the chemist who possesses the concept *water* despite living in a world with no water. If her world contained hydrogen and oxygen, and she possessed concepts of each of these elements, it is suggested, she could come to possess the concept *water* in virtue of theorizing about hydrogen and oxygen combining in the appropriate ratio. The example appears originally in Burge (1982), and has been cited prolifically since, with almost universal assent. But the example is problematic. To my mind, such a theorizer might come to possess the concept  $H_2O$ , which represents water, but could not come to possess the concept *water*. The example errs in treating *water* as a reducible concept, which it is not. Water may be identical to  $H_2O$ , but *water* is not identical to  $H_2O$ . While compound concepts, such as  $H_2O$ , can be possessed in the absence of their instances, irreducible concepts cannot. Understood correctly, the example does provide support for the claim that a concept can be possessed by an individual who has had no contact with its instances, since the chemist in the example could come to possess the concept  $H_2O$ , which is a natural kind concept but one that lacks application in her world. Possession of a fundamental, irreducible concept, in contrast, depends essentially on causal relations to its instances.<sup>7</sup>

The externalist thinks of concepts as public rather than private. You and I may both have the concept *penguin*, and may both believe that penguins can't fly, but we may nonetheless have somewhat different understandings of what penguins are—different beliefs about whether they all live in cold climates, what they eat, how many varieties there are, whether the different varieties can interbreed, whether they're all basically black and white, and so on. But despite these differences, according to the externalist understanding of

---

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of an externalist treatment of empty concepts, see Sawyer (2003). But see Sawyer (2014) for an argument to the effect that fictional predicates, such as 'x is a hobbit', 'x is a wizard', etc. do not express concepts at all.

<sup>7</sup> It is the principle that is important at this juncture, rather than agreement over cases. For the record, I regard *penguin* as a fundamental, irreducible concept, but my view here is hostage to empirical theory. There is insufficient space to elaborate on this here.

concepts as public, it's still penguins that we're thinking about, and this in part because of our causal connections to penguins. It's clear that people have slightly different surrounding beliefs about most things most of the time, but that doesn't prevent us from thinking about the same things. Externalism about representational content explains how this is possible. According to the externalist, grasp of a concept comes in degrees, and the extent to which one grasps a concept varies with one's knowledge of the nature of the things that fall under the concept. The more one knows about penguins, the better one grasps the concept *penguin*.

This conception of concepts has normative implications. According to the externalist, the way in which one *ought* to apply a concept has to be responsive to the nature of the things the concept represents—to the nature of penguins, for instance. These conceptual norms are universal; they govern how one ought to apply a given concept irrespective of how good a grasp of the concept one has. This means that it cannot ultimately be deference to experts that determines how one ought to apply a concept.<sup>8</sup> Consulting an expert can help to improve one's knowledge only insofar as the expert is genuinely knowledgeable about the subject matter, and hence consulting an expert can help one to grasp a concept more fully only insofar as the expert's grasp of the concept is better than one's own; but, crucially, the experts too may get things wrong – sometimes significantly wrong. It is not the experts that determine how one ought to apply concepts, then, but the way the world is.

This brief characterization highlights three main aspects of the externalist theory. First, what an individual represents in thought depends in part, but essentially, on relations she bears to her environment.<sup>9</sup> Second, an individual can think with a concept that she grasps incompletely. Third, thought is governed by norms that do not derive from the subjective resources, abilities, capacities, and so on, of the individual thinker. The norms of thought derive in part from the nature of the world beyond the individual.

## **2. Moral Judgement and Motivation**

With this brief characterization of externalism about representational content in hand, I now turn to the second internalism / externalism debate, which concerns the connection between moral judgement and motivation. Moral judgements are ones that involve moral concepts

---

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is derived from Putnam's hypothesis of the division of linguistic labour. See Putnam (1973).

<sup>9</sup> I think that the relations that a subject must bear to her environment in order to acquire empirical concepts are of necessity non-conceptual relations. For an articulation of this view see Burge (1977) and (1982). The fundamentality of non-conceptual relations is rejected by McDowell in his (1984) and (1986). However, the key, unifying externalist thought is that externalism allows for difference of degree of concept-mastery, and that requires that the targets of our thoughts have their natures fixed independently of any particular conception we have of them.

such as *right*, *wrong*, *good* and *bad* (so-called ‘thin’ moral concepts), and ones that involve moral concepts such as *fairness*, *kindness*, *spite*, *discretion*, *blame*, *guilt*, *enterprise*, *industry*, *assiduity*, *treachery*, *promise*, *offence*, *brutality*, *malice*, *courage*, *deceit*, *gratitude*, and *exploitation* (examples of so-called ‘thick’ moral concepts).<sup>10</sup> Moral judgements—judgements involving such concepts—appear to be motivating. It is clear that in many cases, at least, once we make a sincere moral judgement to the effect that a certain course of action is right or wrong, we are motivated at least to some extent to act accordingly. For example, having judged that it’s right to recycle cardboard rather than throwing it away, I was motivated to take my cardboard to the recycling centre rather than leaving it out with the rubbish; and having judged that it’s wrong to eat meat, I was motivated to stop eating meat. Similarly, having promised to call a friend, I was motivated to do so; and having judged that I had unwittingly caused offence, I was motivated to apologise. There is something peculiar about a person who claims to make these kinds of moral judgements and yet shows no inclination to act in accordance with them; indeed, we are likely to regard the proclamations of such a person as insincere. That there is a connection between moral judgement and motivation is generally agreed. It is the nature of the connection that is disputed.<sup>11</sup>

According to the motivational judgement internalist, the connection between moral judgement and motivation is an ‘internal’ or conceptual one<sup>12</sup>: that is, it is a conceptual truth that moral judgements motivate.<sup>13</sup> According to strong motivational judgement internalism, necessarily, if an individual makes a sincere moral judgement, then she will be overridingly motivated to act in accordance with it. According to weak motivational judgement internalism—on the face of it a more plausible view—necessarily, if an individual makes a sincere moral judgement, then she will be motivated to some extent to act in accordance with

---

<sup>10</sup> I take no stand here on whether the alleged distinction between thick and thin moral concepts is absolute or even theoretically significant.

<sup>11</sup> The question of how moral judgements are connected to motivation is inherently bound up with two other questions: one concerning whether moral judgements are beliefs (the cognitivism / non-cognitivism debate); the other concerning whether there are objective moral truths (the moral realism / anti-realism debate). I leave these issues to one side for the moment, but will return to them towards the end of section 4.

<sup>12</sup> Brink (1989: p. 42) distinguishes three internalist claims here: (i) that the connection between moral judgement and motivation is necessary; (ii) that the necessary connection is a priori; and (iii) that the motivational power of moral judgements cannot depend on substantive facts (e.g. about the content of morality, the nature of rationality, or the nature of moral agents). In what follows I will largely ignore these differences and talk merely of the connection as being conceptual.

<sup>13</sup> Internalism admits of many possible versions. For a thorough taxonomy see Brink (1989: chap.3). For versions of internalism see Blackburn (1984) and (1998), Hume (1739: III, I, 1), Falk (1947), Foot (1958a) and (1958b), Hare (1952: chap.5), Harman (1977), Mackie (1977: chap. 1), McDowell (1978), (1979) and (1985), McNaughton (1988), Nagel (1970) and Smith (1994).

it. This allows that the motivation may be outweighed by conflicting motivations and defeated by mental maladies such as depression, extreme exhaustion, and so on.<sup>14</sup>

Motivational judgement externalism is simply the denial of motivational judgement internalism.<sup>15</sup> As such, the connection between moral judgement and motivation is taken to be external in the sense that whether or not one is motivated depends on factors external to the moral judgement itself—for example, motivation might be taken to depend on contingent facts about one's desires, human psychology more generally, or even the nature of rationality.<sup>16</sup>

The difference between internalism and externalism emerges most graphically in consideration of a character called 'the amoralist'. The amoralist is someone who, we are told, is able to use moral terms to classify actions, character traits, states of affairs, and so on just as other people do, but is not motivated in the least to act appropriately. The amoralist might judge that it's right to recycle, but nonetheless lack any motivation to do so; and the amoralist might judge that it's wrong to eat meat, but nonetheless lack any motivation to stop doing so. Motivational externalists maintain that the amoralist is possible—they maintain that there is no conceptual incoherence in making a moral judgement and failing to be motivated to act in accordance with it. This is because the connection between moral judgement and motivation is an external, i.e. non-conceptual one. The amoralist might, for instance, simply lack the desires that in most of us serve to connect our moral judgements and our motivations. Motivational internalists, in contrast, reject the very coherence of the amoralist, since, according to motivational judgement internalists, the connection between moral judgement and motivation is an internal, conceptual one. As such, they are forced to re-describe the apparent examples of the amoralist as ones that either involve some low-level or masked motivation despite appearances to the contrary, or do not really involve moral judgements, again despite appearances to the contrary. On this latter front, for example, the internalist might maintain that the so-called 'amoralist' does not judge that it's right to recycle cardboard—he judges that recycling cardboard is what other people *call* 'right'; and this, of

---

<sup>14</sup> Weakness of will is often cited as a potential interfering factor, but given the complexities surrounding the concept of weakness of will, I leave it to one side here. It is an implication of my view that someone with a full grasp of all the moral concepts could not suffer from weakness of will. I do not have the space to explore this idea further here.

<sup>15</sup> For varieties of externalism see Brink (1986), (1989) and (1997), Foot (1972), Mele (1996), Shafer-Landau (1998), (2000) and (2003), Stocker (1979), Svavarsdóttir (1999), and Zangwill (2003).

<sup>16</sup> There is a complication in classification here, since some take the defeasibility of moral motivation under conditions such as depression or extreme exhaustion to be consistent with internalism (e.g. Smith 1994), whereas others take it to support externalism (e.g. Shafer-Landau 2003). The complication is eradicated if, as I suggest, there is a synthesised view that emerges from externalism about representational content.

course, is not a moral judgement at all, since it involves the application of no moral concepts.<sup>17</sup>

The nature of the connection between moral judgement and motivation on the one hand, and the coherence or incoherence of the amoralist on the other, appear to be two sides of the same coin. However, I want to suggest that there is no inconsistency in maintaining both that the connection between moral judgement and motivation is conceptual (as the internalist does), and that the amoralist is conceptually coherent (as the externalist does). How can this be? An externalist account of representational content provides the answer, as follows. Moral judgements involve moral concepts; moral concepts (just like non-moral concepts) are representational and hence externally individuated; and as such, individual thinkers can think with a moral concept that they grasp only incompletely. Even if a subject who grasped a moral concept fully would be motivated to act, since it is possible to make a moral judgement involving a concept that one does not fully grasp, it is possible to make a moral judgement but fail to be motivated. Greenberg illustrates this with the following example<sup>18</sup>:

Consider Alice, a moral and political philosopher with a strong libertarian streak. She develops an elaborate moral theory according to which liberty is the fundamental value, and equality is not a value at all. In working out the consequences of the theory, she forms the hypothesis that considerations of fairness are really considerations of equality in another guise. She finds some arguments that support the hypothesis. Eventually, she comes to question whether fairness is a moral virtue, indeed whether it is a reason for action of any kind. Accordingly, she loses the belief that fairness is a reason for action.

Alice believes that it is important to bring one's motivations and actions into line with one's beliefs, and she is good at accomplishing this in her own case. Because of her doubt about whether fairness is a reason for action, she apparently loses any disposition to be motivated to perform fair actions *qua* fair. ... She also apparently loses any disposition to feel resentment or indignation at unfairness. (Greenberg 2009: 140)

---

<sup>17</sup> See Smith (1994: p. 76). For discussion see Brink (1997), Copp (1997), Cuneo (1999), Sayre-McCord (1997) and Smith (1997).

<sup>18</sup> The basic point is also made in brief in Majors and Sawyer (2007).

After the change in her theoretical views, Alice continues to make generally accurate judgements about whether particular actions, procedures and so on are fair—that is, she continues to make moral judgements involving the concept *fair*—but she is no longer motivated appropriately by the judgements because subsequent to the development of her new theory, she ceases to recognise their moral force. It looks here, then, as if we have a case of moral judgement without motivation, and this precisely because we have a subject who grasps a moral concept incompletely.<sup>19</sup>

What might the motivational internalist say in response? There are four *prima facie* possibilities. First, she might say that subsequent to the development of her new theory, Alice lacks the concept of fairness. But this is implausible. Alice has consistent views about which procedures and rules are fair both before and after she develops her moral theory, and her views are standard. Indeed, Alice is most naturally described as having developed a theory precisely about (amongst other things) fairness. Alice simply no longer thinks that fairness is a moral virtue. Second, the motivational internalist might say that while it looks as if Alice's judgements about fairness are the same both before and after the development of her theory, in fact, what look to be judgements of fairness after the development of her theory are in fact judgements merely about what other people call 'fair'. But this, too, is implausible. Alice hasn't changed her mind about the nature of fairness—she's changed her mind about whether or not fairness has any moral worth. Third, the motivational internalist might say that Alice retains her motivation to act in accordance with her judgements about fairness, but that some interfering factor is, after the development of her theory, preventing her motivation from manifesting itself. But what could this interfering factor be? Alice is not suffering from any of the standard maladies associated with interfering factors, such as depression or extreme exhaustion, for instance. Her lack of motivation is, rather, best explained by her false theoretical beliefs. But having false theoretical beliefs cannot plausibly be taken to constitute an interfering factor analogous to suffering from depression or extreme exhaustion. It is implausible, then, to think that Alice retains her motivation. Finally, the motivational internalist might say that Alice's judgements about fairness and unfairness cease to be *moral* judgements after she develops her moral theory. But this response is also inadequate, since fairness *is* a moral virtue; and this entails that judgements involving the concept *fair* are

---

<sup>19</sup> Externalism about representational content has been argued for on three grounds: (i) a subject's ignorance of the underlying microstructure of a kind; (ii) a subject's ignorance of expert knowledge about a kind; and (iii) a subject's non-standard theory about a kind. Plausibly, only (ii) and (iii) apply in the moral case. This does not, however, mark a significant difference between moral and non-moral concepts, since (i) only applies to reducible kind concepts.



moral judgements regardless of who makes them, and hence regardless of whether the subject, like Alice, fails to see that they are. A concept's status as a moral concept does not shift from one occasion of use to another in accordance with the variable beliefs of the thinkers who deploy it.

That Alice's judgements should be regarded as moral judgements is backed by consideration of the internalist claim that *moral consideration* is internally connected to motivation. Put in terms of moral consideration, the internalist claim is ambiguous as between (C1) a subject who recognises a moral consideration is thereby motivated, and (C2) a subject who deploys a moral concept is thereby motivated. My interpretation of the example of Alice assumes that the correct way to understand the internalist claim is as (C2). This must be right. It is deployment of moral concepts—whether or not one recognises them *as* moral concepts—that is essentially connected to motivation. To see this, consider the alternative, (C1). (C1) says that a subject who recognises a moral consideration is thereby motivated. But (C1) is in fact itself ambiguous, having a strong and a weak reading. The strong reading is a reading according to which a subject who recognises a moral consideration—for example, recognises that fairness is a moral consideration, is thereby motivated. But this strong reading is simply too strong to be plausible. First, it would require that subjects possess a conceptual understanding of morality that is beyond that which is required of those making moral judgements; second, recognising that fairness is a moral consideration is recognition without an application to a particular state of affairs, and therefore can have no direct implications for motivation. The weak reading of (C1), on the other hand, is a reading according to which a subject who recognises a moral consideration—for example that a certain action is unfair, is thereby motivated, but this is equivalent to (C2).

Alice is similar in spirit to what Brink has called a *principled* amoralist. He writes, 'Because moral motivation is predicated on the assumption that moral requirements generate reasons for action or have rational authority, it is possible to make moral judgements and yet remain unmoved as long as there are possible conceptions of morality and practical reason according to which moral requirements need not have rational authority.' (1997: p. 18) This he contrasts with an *unprincipled* amoralist, who fails to be motivated because of interfering psychological factors such as depression or extreme exhaustion. Alice, however, is a different kind of principled amoralist than the one Brink conceives. Alice is a principled amoralist not because she comes to question the rational authority of moral judgements—we can stipulate that she consistently takes moral judgements to be authoritative—rather, she is a principled

amoralist because she believes of some of her moral judgements that they are not moral judgements.

The example shows that a good-willed person can make a moral judgement (that a particular state of affairs is unfair, say) and yet fail to be motivated to act accordingly. The lack of motivation is to be explained by the incomplete grasp of the moral concept involved in the moral judgement. It is because Alice has a false moral theory, and hence an incomplete grasp of the relevant concept, that she fails to be motivated by her moral judgements about fairness. In this way, the possibility of the amoralist can be seen to be consistent with there being a conceptual connection between moral judgement and motivation. We might state the conceptual connection as follows:

**Externalist motivational internalism (EMI):** necessarily, if an individual makes a sincere moral judgement, and she has a full grasp of the concepts involved in that moral judgement, then she will be motivated to some extent to act in accordance with it.

(EMI) draws essentially on externalism about representational content to maintain an internal connection between moral judgement and motivation consistent with the possibility of the amoralist.

### 3. Moral Reasons and Motivation

I turn now to the third internalism / externalism debate. The question at issue between the reasons internalist and the reasons externalist is the question of whether a subject's normative reasons for action necessarily derive from her subjective motivational set—from facts about what she is or can be motivated to do, from motivational attitudes that she either has or would have under certain idealised conditions.<sup>20</sup> The reasons internalist maintains that a subject's normative reasons for action do indeed necessarily derive from her subjective motivational set.<sup>21</sup> The reasons externalist, in contrast, maintains that a subject's normative reasons exist independently of her individual motives.<sup>22</sup> Both positions have some intuitive appeal. The internalist position is supported by the natural thought that reasons for action must be capable

---

<sup>20</sup> It is important to realise that the question concerns normative reasons rather than motivating, or explanatory reasons. A subject's motivating, or explanatory reasons are trivially connected to her subjective motivational set.

<sup>21</sup> For versions of reasons internalism see Darwall (1983), Goldman (2009), Koorsgard (1986), Schroeder (2007), Smith (1995) and Williams (1980).

<sup>22</sup> For versions of reasons externalism see Dancy (2000), Gert (2004), Parfit (1997) and Scanlon (1998).

of moving an agent to act—that there is a kind of incoherence in the notion of a reason for action that cannot motivate. This position is often linked to the Humean theory of motivation, according to which desires are essential for action. The externalist position, in contrast, is supported by the natural thought that recognition of a reason to act is recognition of a consideration in favour of acting—that is, recognition of some objective value that exists independently of one's motives. Thus, it might be thought that a child has a reason to own up to breaking the vase, a reason not to cheat at snakes and ladders, a reason to hand in the toy she found in the playground, a reason to share her sweets and so on, even if she has no desire to do any of them, and is not in the least bit motivated to do so. After all, one might think, owning up, playing fairly, handing in lost property and sharing are all, at least in certain circumstances, *the right things to do*, and this provides, in those circumstances, a normative reason to do them.

Despite the fact that both positions have some intuitive appeal, *prima facie* one must choose between them—between reasons that are essentially motivational because subjective, and reasons that are essentially divorced from motivation because objective. Thus we are faced with a theoretically unsatisfactory dilemma. Internalism provides a relatively straightforward answer to the question of how morality can be authoritative and action-guiding, because an agent's moral reasons, like her normative reasons generally, derive from her motivational states. But, as a consequence, internalism has difficulty in accounting for the apparent objectivity of moral reasons, since internalism seems to imply that what one ought to do depends essentially on what one wants to do, rather than on independent, objective moral reasons. In contrast, externalism is consistent with the objectivity of moral reasons, since reasons are assumed not to derive from the subjective motivational sets of individual subjects. But, as a result, externalism faces the question of how morality can be action-guiding, since objective moral reasons may be ones which are entirely disconnected from an individual's subjective motivational set, and hence ones which could play no role in guiding her actions.

I want to suggest a resolution to the debate by drawing on the thesis of externalist motivational internalism (EMI), with its essential reliance on externalism about representational content, as set out in section 2.<sup>23</sup> (EMI) opens up the possibility that a subject's normative reasons for action may be necessarily connected to her subjective

---

<sup>23</sup> For different kinds of hybrid view see McDowell (1978) and (1979) and Wong (2006). In these cases, reasons are taken to be external to the individual but internal to human nature. In my own hybrid view, reasons are more robustly external.

motivational set, even though not derived from her subjective motivational set. Consequently, it opens up the possibility that moral reasons may be both objective and essentially action-guiding. On this view, we could agree with the reasons externalist that normative reasons for action do not derive from an individual's subjective motivational set, maintaining, rather, that normative reasons for action derive from the way the world is—from the very nature of morality. And we could also agree with the reasons internalist that reasons must be essentially capable of motivating. Here, as a reminder, is (EMI):

**Externalist motivational internalism (EMI):** necessarily, if an individual makes a sincere moral judgement, and she has a full grasp of the concepts involved in that moral judgement, then she will be motivated to some extent to act in accordance with it.

And here is how the reconciliation concerning the nature of reasons can be derived. According to (EMI), a subject who possessed a full grasp of the moral concepts would be motivated to act in accordance with her sincere moral judgements. But given externalism about representational content, a subject who possessed a full grasp of the moral concepts would necessarily have a full understanding of the nature of morality. Consequently, the moral judgements of such a subject would of necessity be *correct* moral judgements. But correct moral judgements just are judgements the content of which state objective reasons for acting. As such, objective reasons would be motivating for such a subject precisely because objective reasons would provide the content of her moral judgements, which are, according to (EMI), essentially motivating and action-guiding. Moreover, the fact that objective reasons would provide the content of her moral judgements and hence be action-guiding for such a subject is not accidental; rather, she would make those judgements precisely because they state moral truths and hence provide objective moral reasons to act. Moral reasons, on this picture, are external to the subject in the sense that they do not derive from her subjective motivational set—they are reasons for her no matter what her motivations—but internal to her in the sense that were she to possess a full grasp of the moral concepts, the reasons would feature in her motivational set as the content of her moral judgements. The necessary connection between a moral reason and an individual's subjective motivational set can, then, be stated as follows:

**Externalist reasons internalism (ERI):** necessarily, if an individual makes a sincere moral judgement, and she has a full grasp of the concepts involved in that moral judgement, then the content of her moral judgement will state an external, objective normative reason to act.

(ERI), like (EMI), relies essentially on externalism about representational content. The resulting view provides a necessary connection between external reasons and an individual's subjective motivational set. Clearly we do not in general have a full grasp of all (or even any) moral concepts. However, since grasping a concept is a matter of degree and goes hand in hand with one's understanding of the subject-matter in question, one's subjective motivational set will be related to genuine normative reasons for action to the extent that one grasps moral concepts, and hence to the extent that one understands the nature of morality, which is to say, the extent to which one has moral knowledge. On this view, a subject who fails to be motivated by moral reasons is not irrational, but simply lacking in moral knowledge.

The conjunction of (EMI) and (ERI), with their essential reliance on externalism about representational content, forms a distinctive moral view that I will call 'moral externalism'. Moral externalism is a form of moral cognitivism, since it is committed to the claim that moral judgements are truth-evaluable; it embodies a rejection of the Humean theory of motivation, since it is committed to the claim that moral judgements (beliefs) can motivate in the absence of desires<sup>24</sup>; and it embodies a robust form of moral realism, since it presupposes that moral concepts refer to objective moral properties.<sup>25</sup> Traditionally, of course, motivational judgement internalism and reasons internalism have each been used to argue against moral realism.<sup>26</sup> But if I am right, there is a way to preserve the necessary connection between moral judgement and motivation on the one hand, and reasons and subjective motivational sets on the other, consistent with moral realism. Despite the fact that moral externalism embodies a robust form of moral realism, it would be a mistake to think that moral externalism is committed to the codifiability of moral principles.<sup>27</sup> Moral externalism is committed neither to the claim that there are exceptionless general moral principles, nor to the claim that there is a systematic procedure for determining in a given context the correct

---

<sup>24</sup> See Shafer-Landau (2003) for an argument to the effect that both moral and non-moral beliefs can motivate.

<sup>25</sup> I take moral concepts to be irreducible, but do not think that the irreducibility of moral concepts implies that moral properties are non-natural.

<sup>26</sup> See Hume (1739, III, I, 1) and Mackie (1977).

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of codifiability with which I am sympathetic, see McDowell (1979) and (1981).

answer to a moral question. Correct moral judgements may well be (indeed, I think they are) essentially uncodifiable in this sense. Moral externalism isn't even committed to the claim that there is always a determinate answer, one way or another, on every moral question. The kind of moral realism to which moral externalism is committed allows for a certain amount of vagueness in morality. All that is required is that when there is a determinate answer to a moral question, the answer is determinate independently of the beliefs and motives of subjects.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has been primarily concerned with the implications of externalism about representational content for the nature of moral judgements and the nature of moral reasons. The resulting view, moral externalism, provides a way in which moral judgements can be internally connected to motivation even though it is possible to fail to be motivated by one's sincere moral judgements; and it provides a way in which moral reasons can be essentially action-guiding even though objective. The view is at route externalist, but goes some way towards incorporating underlying internalist intuitions. The view is also part of a broader view according to which norms of thought and action are objective in being determined by the world beyond the individual, but do not as a result lie essentially beyond her grasp.<sup>29</sup>

#### References

- Blackburn, S. (1984) *Spreading the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- (1998) *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Burge, T. (1977) 'Belief *De Re*', *Journal of Philosophy* 74: 338-62.
- (1979) 'Individualism and the Mental', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4: 73-121.
- (1982) 'Other Bodies', in A. Woodfield (ed.) *Thought and Object: Essays on Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (1986a) 'Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind', *Journal of Philosophy* 83: 697-720.

---

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to Michael Morris for helping to clarify the issues of vagueness and objectivity.

<sup>29</sup> There are obvious parallels here between epistemic norms and moral norms. For a discussion of the implications of externalism about representational content for epistemic norms specifically, see Burge (2003) and Majors and Sawyer (2005).

- (1986b) ‘Individualism and Psychology’, *Philosophical Review* 95: 3-45.
- (1986c) ‘Cartesian Error and the Objectivity of Perception’, in P. Pettit and J. McDowell (eds) *Subject, Thought, and Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (1988) ‘Authoritative Self-Knowledge and Perceptual Individualism’, in R. H. Grimm and D. D. Merrill (eds), *Contents of Thought* (Tucson, AZ.: University of Arizona Press).
- (2003) ‘Perceptual Entitlement’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67: 503-48.
- Brink, D. (1986) ‘Externalist Moral Realism’, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* Supplement: 23-42.
- (1989) *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (1997) ‘Moral Motivation’, *Ethics* 108: 4-32.
- Copp, D. (1997) ‘Belief, Reason, and Motivation: Michael Smith’s “The Moral Problem” ’, *Ethics* 108: 33-54.
- Cuneo, T. (1999) ‘An Externalist Solution to the “Moral Problem” ’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59: 359-80.
- Dancy, J. (2000) *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).
- Darwall, S. (1983) *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press).
- Davies, M. (1991) ‘Individualism and Perceptual Content’, *Mind* 100: 461-84.
- (1992) ‘Perceptual Content and Local Supervenience’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 92: 21-45.
- Falk, W. D. (1947) ‘“Ought” and Motivation’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 48: 111-38.
- Foot, P. (1958a) ‘Moral Arguments’, *Mind* 67: 502-13.
- (1958b) ‘Moral Beliefs’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59: 83-104.

- (1972) 'Morality as a System of hypothetical Imperatives', *Philosophical Review* 81: 305-16.
- Gert, J. (2004) *Brute Rationality: Normativity and Human Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Goldman, A. (2009) *Reasons from Within: Desires and Values* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Greenberg, M. (2009) 'Moral Concepts and Moral Motivation', *Philosophical Perspectives* 23: 137-64.
- Hare, R. M. (1952) *The Language of Morals* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Harman, G. (1977) *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Hume (1739) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, P. H. Nidditch (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- Korsgaard, C. (1986) 'Skepticism about Practical Reason', in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Mackie, J. L. (1977) *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin)
- Majors, B. & Sawyer, S. (2005) 'The Epistemological Argument for Content Externalism', *Philosophical Perspectives* 19: 257-80.
- (2007) 'Entitlement, Opacity and Connection', in S. Goldberg (ed.) *Internalism and Externalism in Semantics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- McDowell, J. (1978) 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 52: 13-29.
- (1979) 'Virtue and Reason', *The Monist* 62: 331-50.
- (1981) 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following', in S. Holtzman & C. Leich (eds) *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- (1984) 'De Re Senses', *Philosophical Quarterly* 34: 283-94.



- (1985) 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in T. Honderich (ed.) *Morality and Objectivity* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- (1986) 'Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space', in P. Pettit & J. McDowell (eds) *Subject, Thought, and Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- McNaughton, D. (1988) *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Mele, A. (1996) 'Moral Cognitivism and Listlessness', *Ethics* 106: 727-53.
- Nagel, T. (1970) *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon).
- Parfit, D. (1997) 'Reasons and Motivation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 71: 99-131.
- Putnam, H. (1973) 'Meaning and Reference', *Journal of Philosophy* 70: 699-711.
- Sawyer, S. (2003) 'Sufficient Absences', *Analysis* 63: 202-8.
- (2007) 'There is No Viable Notion of Narrow Content' in B. McLaughlin & J. Cohen (eds) *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (2011) 'Internalism and Externalism in Mind', in J. Garvey (ed.) *The Continuum Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Continuum).
- (2014) 'The Importance of Fictional Properties' in A. Everett and S. Brock (eds) *Fictional Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Sayre-McCord, G. (1997) 'The Metaethical Problem', *Ethics* 108: 55-83.
- Scanlon, T. (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Schroeder, M. (2007) *Slave of the Passions* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Shafer-Landau, R. (1998) 'Moral Motivation and Moral Judgement', *Philosophical Quarterly* 48: 353-8.
- (2000) 'A Defence of Motivational Externalism', *Philosophical Studies* 97: 267-91.
- (2003) *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon).
- Smith, M. (1994) *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell).

- (1995) 'Internal Reasons', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55: 109-31.
- (1997) 'In Defense of "The Moral Problem": A Reply to Brink, Copp, and Sayre-McCord', *Ethics* 108: 84-119.
- Stocker, M. (1979) 'Desiring the Bad', *Journal of Philosophy* 76: 738-53.
- Svavarsdóttir, S. (1999) 'Moral Cognitivism and Motivation', *Philosophical Review* 108: 161-219.
- Williams, B. (1980) 'Internal and External Reasons', in R. Harrison (ed.) *Rational Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Wong, D. B. (2006) 'Moral Reasons: Internal and External', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72: 536-58.
- Zangwill, N. (2003) 'Externalist Moral Motivation', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 40: 143-54.